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Taste-Testing All the Wines at Starbucks' New, Boozy Evenings Program

Can Starbucks make \$1 billion adding alcohol to the mix? Wine critic Elin McCoy is on the case.

Source: Starbucks Coffee Company

Elin McCoy

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At 5 p.m. in the North Seventh Street Starbucks in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, people at wooden tables sip lattes and focus on their laptop screens. Gnarl Barkley's *Crazy* plays on the sound system as I face 10 glasses of wine.

The giant coffee company rolled out its new "[Starbucks Evenings](#)" program of serving wine, craft beer, and small plates last month in 70 U.S. locations. I stopped by the first spot to open in New York in order to put the selections to a taste test.



The Williamsburg location of Starbucks, at which you can actually imagine sipping a glass of wine. Source: Starbucks Coffee Company

First take: The Williamsburg location is, thankfully, a Starbucks at which you can actually imagine sipping a glass of wine. It's more New York hipster loft than the typical soulless venue that offers you a morning jolt of caffeine. Think exposed brick walls, a mural by a tattoo artist, mod shelving with coffee

trees growing in pots, and large tables made from slabs of recycled wood. In one corner, comfy chairs invite you to settle in, glass in hand.

Starbucks first experimented with the Evenings idea in Seattle several years ago. It plans to expand the program to 2,000 U.S. locations by 2020, hoping to add \$1 billion in revenues.



A sample Starbucks Evenings menu, representative of the selection at certain Starbucks, although it isn't precisely the menu we tested at the Williamsburg, Brooklyn, location. Source: Starbucks Coffee Company

Field take: When I arrive, none of the 0-odd customers is drinking wine, though alcohol and food are served from p.m. to closing. A chalkboard behind the bar announces the day's featured wine-and-food pairing—Malbec with truffle mac and cheese. Which, I discover, is a terrible combo.

The jazzy foldout menu offers tasting notes for each wine, mostly accurate: "aromatic and crisp with melon and passion fruit notes" for a illa Maria white "dark fruit and brown spice with hints of clove and pepper" for that Alamos Malbec, although in this instance, it was uite optimistic, rather than completely accurate. Unlike any other wine bar that I've been to, there are also calorie counts for each—10 to 150 calories —per New Yorks law for chain restaurants.

I order five plates, two beers, and all 10 wines—one sparkling, four white, five red. A group of coffee-drinking mothers with kids stare and mutter. The manager, Brandon Giles, who is wearing a porkpie straw hat and a long black apron, brings them on dark wooden trays, in stemless iedel glasses that are etched with New Age-y mantras such as "breathe out, drink in."



The author ordered five plates, two beers, and all 10 wines—one sparkling, four white, five red. Photographer: Elin McCoy/Bloomberg

The giant coffee company rolled out its new program that serves wine, craft beer, and small plates in 70 U.S. locations last month. Food selections vary by store. Source: Starbucks Coffee Company

Take: If you're a vino novice, you'll be fine. Almost all the wines are inoffensive, easy drinking choices, although I wrote "ugh, avoid," in my note on the 201 Apothis, a red blend from California that tasted like a sweet cherry coke. At \$, it was the cheapest wine on the list.

Starbucks brags that a five-person team in Seattle, led by an in-house sommelier, made its way through 500 wines to come up with these 10, widely available, brand-name picks. The program gives the nod to the most popular wine categories of the past few years, except ros. ocations in such places as regon and Washington include at least one local brand a New York State wine may make it to the Brooklyn location at some point.

By-the-glass prices seem reasonable by New York standards—\$ to \$15 —but you should know that bottles of most of these wines cost the same price at retail as a single glass does here. Starbucks will also sell full bottles if people want to order them five have been sold in the past month.

The biggest impact of Evenings may come in locations outside big cities, where theres nowhere else to sip and talk. Maybe, just maybe, theyll entice a whole new group of people to drink wine.



The standard, if unimaginative, cheese plate. Source: Starbucks Coffee Company

Tasting Notes

ne of the best bets is fruity, foamy **Miottrose** \$9. It's simple, but good with the truffle popcorn \$2.5. Part of its appeal is super-freshness. Giles said they open a new uarter-bottle 17 ml for each customer.



The truffle popcorn, best paired with the fruity, foamy Mionetto prosecco rather than the red suggested here. Source: Starbucks Coffee Company

ther wines might have been open for as long as days, he admitted. They're preserved with a acuvín, which, in my experience, keeps wine fresh only for a day and a half.

Crisp, bright **Chateau d'Aud** \$10 is pleasant, with citrus-y hints that perk up truffle mac and cheese \$5.95, as well as the standard, but hardly exciting, cheese plate \$.95: basic cheddar, herbed goat cheese, manchego, dried apricots, and a fig spread that could use some work.

More distinctive is **Chateau d'Aud Maria** \$9, which shows the grapefruit-y, grassy style of New ealand that people either love or hate. It's a solid value, though it didn't go with any of the five dishes I tried.

Smoky **Ferrari** \$12 is not a big buttery California bottling, but you can taste that whack of oak. Don't expect refinement, but it's good with truffle mac and cheese.

Rosatello Moscato (\$9)

2013 Carmel Road pinot noir



2014 Alamos Malbec

but—

2012 Justin Justification

2013 The Show

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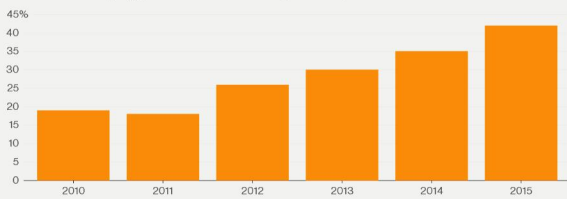
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Source: Treasury Department data compiled by Bloomberg



